

From Holland to the Kawarthas: Business deal done 'on a handshake'

Public event slated for Feb. 3 to show off high-tech facility

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Martin and Sonja Bons will welcome the public to their state-of-the-art dairy goat facility at an open house on Feb. 3 at 1747 Elm Tree Rd. in Lindsay. - Sonja Bons/special to Metroland

A state-of-the-art goat farm in Lindsay is the result of a leap of faith and a handshake.

Bruce Vandenberg, owner of Mariposa Dairy, says the story of Martin and Sonja Bons and their move to Canada came about because the Bons and their five children had the courage to "leave everything behind" in their native Holland.

Vandenberg says Martin Bons worked a herd of 750 dairy goats on his farm in Holland along with his brother, who raised dairy cattle.

Because there was no room to expand his Holland farm, Bons applied for a visa to come to Canada in 2010.

"The visa was due to expire in November of 2015," Vandenberg said, adding the Bons couldn't sell their Holland farm and goat herd due to the European economic climate at the time.

"In the summer of 2015, I got a call from Martin, asking if I had a mature herd, which we did, about 1,300 goats," he said.

In October of 2015 the two men worked out a deal by which the Bons would come to Canada and manage the Vandenberg herd for two years, supplying the goats milk for Mariposa Dairy.

After that time period, the Bons had the option to buy the Vandenberg farm or another property and take over ownership of the herd.

Vandenberg said managing Mariposa Dairy's renowned cheese operation and a large herd of goats "had become overwhelming" so the agreement with the Bons came at the perfect time.

"And, it was all done on a handshake," Vandenberg said.

Because the clock was ticking on the Bons' visa, Vandenberg said when the family couldn't sell the Holland farm, they left it in Bons' brother's hands and came to Canada "on a leap of faith" in late November, 2015, just before the visa expired.

"They milked goats in the morning and showed up at the airport that night I went to pick them up...they had 14 suitcases," Vandenberg laughed.

He and his wife, Sharon, moved into a rental home, allowing the Bons family to live in the Vandenberg home.

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"They moved in and started managing the herd within two weeks."

In 2016, the Bons finally sold the Holland farm and goats and had the opportunity to buy their own farm, which is where they have built a state-of-the-art dairy goat facility on Elm Tree Road in Lindsay. They also took over the Vandenberg goat herd.

Vandenberg said the facility was completed in the spring of 2017.

It incorporates top-class features, including a main barn (102 feet wide by 488 feet long), a 100-goat rotary parlour with adjustable floor height and speed control, a fresh water bowl circulation system and a 28,000 litre bulk milk cooler, to name a few.

The barn holds 2,000 milking goats; it is large enough that walking around it means you would travel half a kilometer. It has three distinct features; an excellent drinking water system, a flat floor (designed for future robot feeding) and a computer-controlled curtain that is raised and lowered according to weather conditions.

There is also a nursery for 200 baby goats featuring the latest technology and an overhead fire door, which will close if either one of the two sections of the barn is on fire.

"It's very high-tech," Vandenberg said.

There will be an open house at the farm on Saturday, Feb. 3 to give the public a look at the new facility.

Vandenberg said the herd of goats has not yet been moved to the new building for safety reasons.

"At the open house, you can tour the facility and have a chance to see the technology. Martin brought a lot of ideas from Europe. It's the only chance to see it; once the animals are moved in it will be closed," Vandenberg said, adding "every dairy farmer in the area" will be there to see it.

Vandenberg said the Bons are to be commended for their willingness to leave everything behind to take advantage of a new opportunity.

"It's a great story and there was tremendous support from the community," Vandenberg said.

As for him and his wife, they will soon move back to their own home.

"We've done our 9,000 milkings," he laughed.

The open house takes place from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 1747 Elm Tree Rd. A light lunch will be provided.

